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ETHNOGRAPHY IS DOGMATICS: MAKING DESCRIPTION CENTRAL TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott

THE purpose of this article is to suggest that dogmatic theology is best practised through description of the world. Its method is to marry two unlikely characters: Karl Barth, Swiss Reformed theologian, and Michel Foucault, French atheist philosopher and historian. The thesis we propose can be presented directly. Barth is well known for insisting, in his ethics lectures in Münster and Bonn (1928/29 and 1930/31 respectively) and volume II of his *Church Dogmatics*, that ethics is dogmatics. Foucault famously rejected ethics which makes universal normative claims in favour of producing descriptions of historical phenomena and letting the reader make moral judgments accordingly. His method, we suggest, understands ethics as ethnography. We have taken these two ways of thinking together and excluded the middle term: ethics. This has yielded the abbreviated form: ethnography is dogmatics.

The task we have set ourselves is not easy, however. Barth's 'ethics is dogmatics' approach is far from straightforward. His idea that ethics is best understood as 'a special elucidation of the doctrine of sanctification', and that a general (philosophical) conception of ethics 'coincides exactly with the conception of sin' is not quickly explained.¹ Saying something intelligent about

¹ Karl Barth, *Ethics* (ed. D. Braun, tr. G. Bromiley. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p. 3; Barth *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 518. For a good account of the relationship between ethics and dogmatics in Barth see Eberhard Jüngel, 'Evangelium und Gesetz' in *Barth-Studien* (Köln: Benziger, 1982), pp. 180–209. Jüngel shows how Barth reverses Luther's 'law and gospel' to 'gospel and law', and indicates that this reversal is a good summary for understanding why, in the relationship between dogmatics and ethics, dogmatics has priority for Barth. Where Luther says law articulates tasks and gospel articulates promises, Barth insists both tasks and promises, law and gospel, must be taken together. Rather than the 'proper

Foucault's 'ethics is ethnography' method (as we shall characterise it) is hazardous, because to summarise his approach theoretically is rather obviously to miss its point and to give an account of it in the very terms it rejects. The first and second parts of this article will nevertheless try to do justice to some of their insights about ethics and suggest what can be learned from them. The third and fourth parts will attempt to do what the previous sections advertise: describe things. They form the crux of the article. The final section will summarise our intentions and suggest how 'ethnography is dogmatics' might influence future dogmatic inquiry and, in particular, the part of dogmatic inquiry often called Christian ethics.

1. Ethics is Dogmatics

In a fragment entitled 'the world of conflicts', which forms part of E. Bethge's edition of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer declares 'The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge'.² Bonhoeffer notes that it is only *after* eating of the tree of knowledge that Adam and Eve come to know good and evil. Thus this very knowledge is a consequence of the Fall. 'Man at his origin knows only one thing: God . . . The knowledge of good and evil shows that he is no longer at one with this origin'.³ What is true of our first ancestors is true *a fortiori* of our own pursuits. Just as knowledge of good and evil is a product of

difference' (Luther) we should seek the 'proper relation' (Barth) between gospel and law, i.e. if ethics relates to law, and dogmatics relates to gospel, then Barth's treatment of the relation between gospel and law illuminates his treatment of the relation between dogmatics and ethics. For discussion in English see especially Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Timothy Gorringe, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 88–93; Eberhard Jüngel, 'Invocation of God as the Ethical Ground of Christian Action' in *Theological Essays I* (ed. J. Webster, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), pp. 154–72; John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). Happily, these works fully address the question of the relationship between divine and human action in Barth's work, and preclude the need to revisit this question here.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed. E. Bethge, tr. N. Horton Smith. London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 3. Note: the order of the articles edited by Bethge was revised in later editions. The page numbers here refer to the 1998 impression, which follows the order from the sixth German edition.

³ *Ibid.*

disobedience to God, so attempts to seek after this knowledge further are extensions of this original sin. Philosophical ethics, or moral philosophy, are precisely attempts of this kind, according to Bonhoeffer. That is, they seek knowledge of good and evil without reference to God. For Bonhoeffer, God is the only one who can truly tell humans who they are and what is good. Any knowledge apart from this is knowledge apart from God, and this is what is meant by sin. As a consequence, for there to be 'Christian Ethics', which really is Christian, there must be an enterprise which does not continue this sinful inquiry but, on the contrary, seeks to learn and practise an obedience that Adam and Eve refused.

Barth also rehearses this theme and relates it to the way the tradition has understood the relation between ethics and dogmatics. He describes, in particular, the gradual separation of the two. Barth insists that in much post-Reformation thinking ethics is described as something which goes beyond 'mere' dogmatics. In the seventeenth century, the 'dogmaticians now protest what the reformers had taken for granted, namely, that theology is not just a theoretical but also a practical discipline, indeed, that it is even more practical than speculative'.⁴ Once it becomes conceivable that dogmatics is something other than practical, then it becomes possible to conceive of a non-dogmatic discipline that will make up this practical shortfall.

Barth thinks the idea that dogmatic theology is speculative *rather than* practical is a modern mistake, and one which cannot be attributed to the reformers themselves. Any attempt to remedy the lack which is now attributed to dogmatic theology, in something called ethics, rests on this mistake and is to be rejected. This view, presented in his ethics lectures, is conjoined with Bonhoeffer's remarks from 'the world of conflicts' in volumes II, III and IV of *Church Dogmatics*.⁵ There Barth suggests non-dogmatic ethics is a mistake about the nature of dogmatics. He shows how in the 1940s it depends dangerously on a form of ethical thinking (in 'pure' philosophy) which sees itself not as a practical dimension of theology but as an enterprise

⁴ Barth, *Ethics*, p. 7.

⁵ For an explicit acknowledgement of Bonhoeffer see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 4.

distinguishable *from* theology. This is what Barth calls the 'general conception of ethics' which he sees, in different forms, in the work of Rousseau, Bentham, Feuerbach and Nietzsche.⁶ It is unsurprising that Barth should set his face against this project. It denies that humans must look to God for an authoritative revelation of the good.

Thus there are for Barth two dangers: splitting theology into dogmatics *and* ethics, and proceeding analogously to a non-theological (and eventually explicitly non-Christian) general conception of ethics. These two dangers conspire to produce a Christian ethics which is insufficiently theological at best, and which classes Christian ethics as a sub-species of general ethics at worst.

The slogan 'ethics is dogmatics' is the banner under which Barth tries, in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, to revisit this territory and reclaim it from hostile intellectual forces. 'Our contention is, however, that the dogmatics of the Christian Church, and basically the Christian doctrine of God, is ethics'.⁷ Another way of putting it is to say that the question 'what is the good?' is the same question as 'who is God?'. At this point, Barth puts the question of general ethics behind him. He does not say that it cannot be done, and he does not say that attempts to give purely human answers to questions of good and evil are contradictory. He merely says that it is an enterprise with which he is not concerned. Barth is not surprised that general ethics should be as keenly discussed as it is in public debate. Indeed it seems to him that because of the work of God's grace, the question of the good is inescapably posed to humanity. Nonetheless, such a human enterprise is a poor substitute for a proper Christian ethics: 'as a result and in prolongation of the fall, we have "ethics", or, rather, the multifarious ethical systems, the attempted human answers to the ethical question'.⁸

What Barth advertises in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, he continues, but does not live to complete, in *Church Dogmatics* IV/4, fragments of which, unpublished in IV/4 itself, are published as a posthumous volume in the collected works.⁹ Here Barth lays

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 514.

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 515.

⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 517.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (tr. G. Bromiley. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981).

out in greater detail how Christological description informs human agency. The detail (here and elsewhere) of Barth's discussion of the relationship between ethics and dogmatics has been extensively visited, mapped and expounded by Barth scholars. The thrust of Barth's approach can, however, be summarised, albeit in a superficial way. Barth tries to show that the task of Christian ethics is in fact a task for the doctrine of God. Furthermore, that task will be one of illuminating God's revelation of what is good. For Barth, this means primarily understanding the force of the command issued to Jesus Christ and obeyed by him. There is, Barth insists, no meaningful conception of the good independent of this. When the word is applied to humans it refers not to a human achievement but to being sanctified by God.

For Barth one does ethics by describing God and by describing God's command in Jesus Christ. Ethics is dogmatics.

2. Ethics is Ethnography

To describe Michel Foucault's many-sided project as ethical is already to risk making a mistake. Foucault distances himself from ethics. Foucault's purposes are different from Barth's, and his reasons for abandoning an ethics which sees itself as theorising the raising of validity claims could not be in starker contrast. We admit at the outset that Foucault is a most unpromising person to juxtapose with Barth. Nonetheless, it is probably not a mistake to understand Foucault's writing as a form of moral discourse. It is not strictly ethics, in so far as it refuses the categories and types of claim that fall under that heading. Yet Foucault makes a claim on his reader. It is just that for Foucault there is nothing to be added by trying to explain why this claim is valid. If the claim is successful, all well and good. If it is not, then further explanations and protests are fruitless. In this he is, perhaps, close to Barth. Barth thunders his insistence that God is the only authority and that Christian speech should acknowledge only this authority and no other, but he seizes no opportunity to justify to his readers this insistence. Barth makes his claim, and he seems to think that nothing is gained by trying to validate it independently of the values with which this claim has to do.

There are many parts of Foucault's work that might serve the purpose of illustrating his means of making a claim. The one presented here is well known: the opening of *Discipline and Punish*.

Surveiller et punir, published in 1975, famously opens with a description of the bloodily botched execution of Robert François Damiens, a soldier who tried to assassinate Louis XV. Drawing on publications from 1757 (the year of the execution) and on work by the historian Alexandre Zevaes, Foucault presents the reader with the spectacle of a man brutally and incompetently tortured to death. The details of this death are crucially important: Foucault offers descriptions of the use of red-hot pincers, burning sulphur and prolonged repeated attempts at drawing and quartering. Foucault's intention in what follows it is to show how the decline of torture and the rise of a new kind of punishment (the modern prison) occurred in France.

The question to ask Foucault is 'why are you telling us this?'. The striking aspect of Foucault's style is the uncompromisingly detailed description and his restraint in commenting on it. He offers no explicit moral judgments upon the phenomena he describes, and no validity claims are raised about the practices he offers for the reader's inspection. Foucault's agency is self-consciously restricted. The mood of his commentary on the scenes he represents is rigorously indicative. Any uses of 'must' or 'should' or 'ought' are generally part of indirect speech. Foucault's answer to the question why he tells what he tells is given indirectly. It is striking that *Discipline and Punish* does not begin with an account of the book's purposes but begins with the sentence 'On 2 March 1757 Damiens the regicide was condemned . . .'.¹⁰ Only towards the end of the first chapter does Foucault make explicit what he intends to do: write a genealogy of modern European systems of punishment.¹¹ It is from this delay between direct description and secondary elucidation that we wish to learn.

It is not our purpose to attempt detailed discussion of this work. The opening of *Discipline and Punish* illustrates clearly what

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (tr. A. Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1977), p. 3.

¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 23.

we wish to take from Foucault. Any moral claim made by Foucault's writing is not described in theoretical ethical terms. It is left to the reader to respond to the genealogy. This is not to say that Foucault hides his moral convictions. Nor is it to say that Foucault has no interest in moral discourse. It is more that Foucault does not recognise any surplus value in adding explicit validity claims to the claims made by his descriptions. His writing purposely *refuses* to present itself ethically. Yet it would be naïve to suggest that understanding his work as moral discourse is purely a function of the reader. It certainly is for the reader to treat the claim made as a claim, rather than as entertainment or a museum exhibit, but this can itself only be a response to a claim.

We realise there are grave hazards in presenting Foucault in this fashion, even if we admit the extreme sketchiness of our characterisation of his method. What is true of *Discipline and Punish* is, for example, not true of all of Foucault's writing. We have chosen this work because here Foucault has developed a rigorously descriptive procedure. It is from this emphatically descriptive method that we wish to learn in correcting how we see Christian ethics/dogmatics. It is difficult to generalise about Foucault, given the different conceptions of his work he offers in different writings. We undoubtedly oversimplify him and make no attempt accurately to convey his self-understandings. It would be easy to show, for example, that he does raise explicit validity claims for his method in according concepts like 'historical change' or (in later work) the transcendental concept 'power' a quasi-metaphysical validity.¹² We think, nonetheless, that what

¹² Jürgen Habermas has indicated these difficulties: see 'The Critique of Reason as an Unmasking of the Human Sciences: Michel Foucault' and 'Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again' in Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (tr. F. Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity, 1987), pp. 238–93. Habermas shows how Foucault, like Heidegger, avoids making grand metaphysical claims about 'Being' or 'History'; nonetheless, just as Heidegger claims substantial knowledge about 'disclosure of being' so Foucault claims reliable descriptions of 'processes of change', and these function in a quasi-metaphysical way. Habermas objects that Foucault is insufficiently genealogical about his own genealogical method and altogether too positive about the validity of his own practices. Furthermore, Foucault smudges the empirical-descriptive meaning of power with the transcendental meaning of power, allowing the second to be parasitic on the first. Similar objections can be discerned, with Foucault's implicit 'ontology of violence' more obviously in view, in John Milbank's critique of Foucault in *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 286–94.

we have learned from Foucault really has been learned from Foucault and not from a false belief about his work. Foucault's self-understandings are less important to us: his practice seems better than what he says about his practice.¹³

To say that Foucault does ethics is misleading for the reasons we have briefly indicated. Nonetheless, it is equally misleading to say there is Christian ethics. Barth's 'ethics is dogmatics' approach corrects what is meant by ethics. Yet Barth is content to allow his writing to be described as a form of Christian ethics. Clearly it is essential to understand that his 'moral theology' (as John Webster carefully describes it in drawing attention to Barth's reformulation of liberal concerns 'through quite different categories') is an elucidation of that part of the doctrine of God which bears on human action.¹⁴ The word ethics is problematic when describing *both* Barth *and* Foucault. Both are engaged primarily in forms of description. Barth's is a description of God's action and human action; Foucault's is a description of human action alone. Both are moral discourses, but neither is justified in theoretical ethical terms. Indeed they reject such terms. That is, they both refuse to be positioned from outside.

With these provisos in mind, and with the word ethics under suspicion, for Foucault moral claims are made through description. Ethics is ethnography.

Summary: we wish to advocate ethnography as a dogmatic task for theology. Furthermore, we suspect there is little added value in attempts to supplement descriptions of the world with validity claims about those descriptions. We even doubt the added value of making the dogmatic presuppositions of description explicit. This is not because we believe accounts of dogmatic presuppositions are meaningless. Quite the opposite: we agree wholly that dogmatic elucidations expose what motivate those descriptions. Our point is precisely that these things are *already* at work in the descriptions themselves, and that elucidations merely elucidate rather than add anything new. We are aiming at a form of description which acknowledges the dogmatics that

¹³ A similar concern (or lack of concern) characterises the superb defence of Foucault against Habermas by J. M. Bernstein in *Recovering Ethical Life* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 166.

¹⁴ John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 4.

is at work within it, but is liberated to attend to the practices of description themselves (rather than substitute dogmatic analysis or theoretical validity claims for the detail of description). We see such an attention to descriptive detail in the work of Barth and Foucault, but wish to marry accounts of God (Barth) and detailed description of the world (Foucault).

Despite these protestations, in the final section we will attempt dogmatic elucidation. This is not because we think this adds anything new. Rather, it is intended as a dispensable clarification which substantiates our claim to acknowledge the dogmatics at work within our descriptions.

What follows are two case studies. Description of them affords an opportunity to illustrate a dogmatic perspective and, in particular, to draw attention to a perspective implicit in our Christian moral thought. We have no hermeneutic theory to justify our accounts. We are describing things, although not naïvely, as they appear to two Christians who are trying to make God's story our story, and who do not wish to have one mode of speech for describing the world, and a different mode of speech for speaking of God. We are trying to describe God's world and, in particular, the weak in God's world.

3. The Chipko movement

The background to the Chipko movement in Northern India must start with the character of the life of forest dwellers. Seen from the standpoint of metropolitan political science, these are the classically marginalised – poor, illiterate, geographically scattered, with a preponderance of female-headed households as men tend to be absent, either on the plains or in regional towns looking for paid employment. Seen more anthropologically, forest dwellers have a naturally symbiotic relationship with the forest on which they depend for food, fuel, construction materials, herbs and the wherewithal for handicrafts. Herbs and handicrafts represent the major source of 'export' to the plains and therefore pay for critically important food and grain imports which are not easily grown in the forest area. As the population of forest dwellers increases through the natural growth of population, so access to the forest, especially for export goods, becomes increasingly important. Theoretically, there is a highly

precarious balance when the demands made upon the forest by forest dwellers are equal to the supply of the various outputs that the forest can produce. As this balance is approached, forest dwellers themselves come under greater and greater pressure, e.g. having to walk further to find valuable herbs or types of wood suitable for handicrafts.

So far, we have set the picture in terms of the forest and forest dwellers; in fact, of course, there is an important third term, namely the Forestry Department. Under the colonial regime, forest dwellers were seen as ('constructed as', in hermeneutic terms) a nuisance, whose activities were to be restricted in order to allow sole access to prime forest resources for capital-intensive logging companies. In broad terms, this colonial attitude survived Independence and, until the Chipko movement became well-established, the Forestry Department saw its job as constraining forest dwellers in a way that would maximise high quality timber yields for plains-based logging companies.

The last important piece of the jigsaw is the employment effect of both the Forestry Department and the logging companies. As has already been emphasised, male forest dwellers seek to supplement their subsistence forest-based income by selling their labour to employers. The two most obvious employers in the forest regions are, first, the Forestry Department and, second, the logging companies. There is thus a sharp division of interest between those, exclusively men, who derive their income from the commercial exploitation of the forest; and those, mostly women, who derive their subsistence from a more symbiotic relationship with the forest. It will be immediately clear that, given the structure of Indian society, economically and politically the latter group is relatively powerless.

The isolation and remoteness of the Uttar Kannad was abruptly shattered by the Indo-Chinese war which suddenly made the region an area of great strategic significance. Into it were driven military roads used, after the passing of the military emergency, by logging companies who suddenly found the cost of extraction of high-quality timber dramatically reduced. With the extension of logging activities went increased employment opportunities, further supplemented by the construction of additional access roads, opening up whole new areas of prime

forest. The existing split between paid employment and subsistence employment was reinforced – even though the earnings of the employees of logging companies were pitifully small. One reason why they were so low was that the logging companies continued the highly dubious tradition of the colonial era of paying workers in part, directly or indirectly, with alcohol. An alcohol-dependent workforce is a very cheap and, when sober, compliant workforce.

It was this abuse that had, at least since 1906, been the subject of local resistance. Unsurprisingly it was the women who had played a particular role in objecting to their menfolk being made violent by alcohol. With this long tradition of usually ineffective resistance, a number of local organisations had emerged. Some of these came to be the embryo out of which the Chipko movement was born. The Sarvodaya movement was one such. In an attempt to offer an alternative, the Sarvodaya movement had formed a road construction co-operative which was able to pay double the wages, in cash, of the contractors brought in by the logging companies. Later, the same group re-established themselves as a co-operative (Sangh) using local timbers for tool-making. From this they expanded into saw-milling, buying a few trees at a time from the Forestry Department and selling planks, either locally for construction purposes, or exporting them to the plains.

This may have proved an effective way of countering some of the worst evils of payment by liquor, but of course it only exacerbated pressure on the forest. Indeed, this pressure increased as the logging companies outbid the Sangh for stands of trees sold by the Forestry Department – and then bribed Forestry officials to allow them to cut unscheduled timber to make good the profits foregone by the original overbid.

It is worth emphasising here that the Forestry Department, so easily represented as the evil genius, was in many respects doing its job. Its job was to exploit the forest for the benefit of State revenue. It therefore had an interest in maximising revenues from the logging companies and if one way of doing that was to allow some of their officials to make a little on the side by compensating the logging companies for extravagant prices—well, who loses? The lock-step with the logging companies and the Forestry Department, and the State Treasury

behind the latter, thus ensured that they marched together to crush resistance or competition offered by any organisations that forest dwellers could put together.

It was neither commercial competition nor political resistance from the Sangh that began to break the lockstep. It was the major floods of the Alaknanda river in 1970 in which over two hundred people lost their lives and, perhaps more politically significant, which resulted in major silting problems in the plains which crippled irrigation and power-generation for six crucial months. Was this one of those random acts of God which occasionally afflict us all? Or did it have a much more obvious cause? The Sangh took the second view, producing in a detailed report to the state Government evidence of over-logging, clear-cutting, poorly-designed access roads, and the denudation of steep slopes which, taken together, would inevitably result in accelerated run-off, massive landslides and destructive surges of flood water in a heavy monsoon. The forest was being destroyed. It was taking a terrible revenge. And it was the forest dwellers, whose natural habitat was being destroyed by both man and nature, who would pay the highest price. The Government ignored the report.

The Sangh realised that it was confronting hugely powerful vested interests. Protests, marches, education campaigns, meetings with journalists, politicians, senior civil servants—all proved useless. Useless but irritating. After two years of continual pressure, the Forestry Department sought to destroy the Sangh by refusing to sell it any wood for its tool workshop. A hungry Sangh would be a silent Sangh.

The Forestry Department misjudged the Sangh. By adding insult to injury by selling the trees to the Simon Company, a manufacturer of sports goods from the plains, the Forestry Department created a powerful rallying cry: tennis racquets before tools. It was out of the mass protest against the activities of the Simon Company, the sports goods manufacturer, that Chendi Prasad, the moving spirit behind the Sangh, developed the notion of hugging trees (Chipko means 'to hug' or 'cling to'). The Sangh was to resist the loggers of the Simon Company non-violently but at great personal cost. If the loggers wished to take the trees, they could do so—but only by putting their axes through the torsos of the Sangh workers

and their womenfolk who would cling to the trees marked for cutting.

The Sangh won the initial face-off, but the Forestry Department merely allocated the Simon Company an even better stand of trees in another area. Hence the Chipko movement spread—despite threats and physical violence offered by the loggers as they found themselves constantly frustrated by villagers throughout the region protecting the trees with their own bodies.

The forest had its own say. In 1974 the Mandakini river flooded even more disastrously than the Alaknanda four years before. If some more observant officials in the plains were beginning to wonder aloud about the increasing frequency and the severity of flooding, such thinking made little impact in the Forestry Department which continued its traditional role. To Chendi Prasad and the Sangh it was almost inconceivable that, in the same year that the Mandakini had flooded, the Forestry Department sold a large stand of trees in one of the key catchment areas of the Alaknanda river in the Reni region, thus inviting yet another flood from the Alaknanda. Their attempt to have the auction cancelled failed, but it did attract the attention of a group of radical students who wanted to disrupt the auction by methods the Sangh would not in the event countenance.

The details of the final showdown at Reni read like a Hollywood drama. The Government tried to lure the workers of the Sangh away from the site by offering to pay compensation for damage sustained during the Indo-Chinese war, claims that they had resisted for fourteen years. The loggers were, however, confronted by the women led by the redoubtable Gaura Davi who, as eye witness reports have it, bared her breast and invited them to shoot her as she hugged a majestic but marked tree. The melodrama of this scene, initially reported by student activists and checked out by responsible journalists, caught the Indian imagination to such an extent that the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh found himself under irresistible pressure to meet with Chendi Prasad and the leadership of the Sangh. Despite a long history of denunciatory rhetoric against the Sangh and their claims that the logging companies were destroying the forest and causing the floods, the Chief Minister eventually

set up a committee of experts to examine the ecology of the Uttar Kannad.

When it eventually reported, the committee went much further than the Sangh. They declared the Reni forest and a large section of the Alaknanda watershed a sensitive area and requested that the Government put a ten-year ban on all tree felling over an area of 450 square miles. This was gradually extended as a result of pressure from the Chipko movement and by the end of the 1970s the Forestry Department reversed its normal policy and sought local advice, including that of the Chipko workers, before auctioning any stands throughout the region to logging companies.

Both the Department and the Chipko movement now realised the destruction had already gone so far as to be in danger of becoming irreversible. They therefore co-operated on a massive reforestation programme far larger than the meagre under-funded efforts that the Forestry Department had hitherto been undertaking, in an attempt to re-establish forest cover before the fragile top soils were totally leached off the hillsides.

In this way the resistive, obstructive activities of the Chipko movement have been transformed into one of the most positive signs of hope for the Uttar Kannad as a whole. But even that is to sell Chendi Prasad and the Chipko movement short. Prasad himself sees that the real issues are about human values. 'Our movement goes beyond the erosion of the land to the erosion of human values', he is quoted as saying. 'The centre of all this is humankind. If we are not in a good relationship with the environment, the environment will be destroyed and we will lose our ground. But if you halt the erosion of humankind, humankind will halt the erosion of the soil.'

The Chipko movement's story is worth telling in detail because it illustrates exactly the point of our argument. It was finally successful in changing both policy and consciousness for a combination of five reasons. One, it organised poor people around issues that they recognised as being crucially important to their survival. Two, it developed a strategy that, however high-risk it looked *ante facto*, was rooted in Gandhian non-violence but was symbolically and visually appealing. Three, it became proficient at collecting data which Government experts had to take seriously. Four, it gave the most marginalised groups in the

forest influence over their own future. The role of the women should never be underestimated. And five, it combined throughout its history a combination of positive action and resistance. From the early days of the Sangh running a co-operative to undermine the tradition of payment by liquor, to the engagement of the whole Chipko movement in a massive reforestation, Chipko showed that its struggle was not just about outsmarting the Forestry Department, the State Government and the logging companies. Perhaps most important of all, Chipko was about a revolution of human values. It was not, despite much of the popular literature, about saving trees. It was about charting an evolution in the relationship between forest dwellers and their environment. And that became a code, a symbol, for a much deeper debate about the symbiosis of humankind and the wider environment. In this sense, Chipko is about environmental ethics on the hoof; about the articulation of values by which a small minority have always lived but which the majority of us have yet to learn.

4. The Narmada Dam

This is a complex story about the same themes as Chipko—the capacity of powerless people to change radically the ways of operating of international capital and the State apparatus.

To set the background we need to keep separate two sets of issues. The first set leads to the long-running hostility between the three states in western India which share the waters of the Narmada valley. The states involved—Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh—each have similar needs for more water in order to increase irrigation, thereby extending the acreage of land available for double-cropping and all the employment and income benefits associated with the ‘green revolution’. Put like that, it sounds cold-blooded and technocratic: anyone with experience of Indian political life at state or local level knows, however, that these issues arouse passions and ignite hostilities that too frequently lead to bloodshed and to endemic rural violence.

The rational way forward was for a collaborative deal, whereby the three states would agree to a large dam, or set of dams, to impound excessive run-off and thereby increase the supply of

water for irrigation—but on a collaborative basis in which the increased supply of water would be shared between the three states.

The second set of factors surrounds the World Bank. There are two somewhat contrasting points to make. The first is that the building of the Narmada Dam, from 1985, coincides with the period in which the World Bank was associated, not only in India but throughout the developing world, with so-called structural adjustment programmes. This process of structural adjustment had of course ideological overtones but, more important, it had direct impact on the lives of most citizens of developing countries and especially of the urban poor. In many countries this led to considerable political instability and popular protest and, although India needed less drastic structural adjustment than many other countries, the sense of outrage suffered by left-of-centre politicians was shared by many in the large and vocal NGO sector in India who found themselves picking up the pieces of shattered lives after the implementation of structural adjustment reforms. In the minds of many, this raised questions about sovereignty and accountability—and therefore of democracy, the bank's leading political lodestone—which had a resonance throughout formal and informal political life in India.

Paradoxically, however, this period of unusually severe criticism of the World Bank coincided with a period in which the Bank itself—or at least elements within it, for the bank should never be interpreted too monolithically—was becoming increasingly disenchanted with models of economic development that ignored issues of distribution and social justice. Increasingly influenced by the international Non-Governmental Organisation movement and the intellectual case for so-called 'real' aid—i.e. aid which actually affects the lives of the poor, not just the lower and middle classes—at least some elements at the Bank were open to giving much more careful consideration to the distributional impact of Bank policies and projects than would have been the case in, for example, the 1970s.

When the Bank was invited to co-fund the Narmada Dam to the (original) tune of \$450 million, therefore, it was not difficult for the 'real aid' champions within the Bank's operational departments to ensure that the agreements between the Bank

and the Government of India, acting for the three states involved, included what looked on paper to be remarkably liberal, indeed progressive, clauses concerning the resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) of those who would be displaced by the rising waters of what would be one of the biggest dam projects in the world. Perhaps—learning from previous bitter experience—the Bank included in the agreement clauses that went far beyond any previous equivalent agreements in terms of securing, not only a higher standard of living for the oustees, but also guarantees that their community cohesion would be respected and reinforced in the process of resettlement. Even more surprising, the oustees were guaranteed that they would be included in a subsequent participative process of decision-making about their resettlement and rehabilitation in their new environment.

With the wisdom of hindsight, these clauses look so generous that one is obliged to ask how the various actors involved (the Bank, the Government of India, the state governments in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh, and the not inconsiderable professional expertise upon which each could draw) thought that they would be deliverable. It is hard to resist the conclusion that, for at least some of the actors, the justification went something like this: the vast majority of the oustees are tribal peoples, in Indian terms well below the horizon of social and political visibility. They would therefore be unable to enforce any conditions between the government of India and the World Bank. Further, as the R&R terms would not need to be enforced for a number of years, the dust would have by then settled and the tribals could be cleared off without the expense or administrative and political inconvenience implied in the strict adherence to the terms of the agreement.

If that seems overly cynical an interpretation, credibility is lent to it by the extraordinary role played by the Government of Gujarat. In order to secure the agreement of the other parties to the deal that began to take shape, the Government of Gujarat offered to resettle oustees from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh on an unlimited scale—despite the fact that Gujarat itself was desperately short of arable land and even more short of irrigable land which the terms of the agreement guaranteed at a minimum of two hectares per farmer or major son of a farmer. It is simply inconceivable that the Government of Gujarat

would commit itself to so lavish a promise if it thought there was any likelihood of it being forced to deliver. Subsequent events revealed the high price attached to this degree of cynicism.

For a relatively short period it looked as though this calculation might pay off. Although there was immediately considerable opposition to the dam, primarily from oustees, the early stages of construction brought with it a huge demand for unskilled labour from which the inhabitants of the valley could benefit. There was thus the typical division of opinion (which we also noticed in Uttar Kannad) between those who were doing very nicely out of the construction work, at least in the short run, and those who, perhaps taking a longer view, were wholly, and increasingly vocally, opposed to the whole conception of the dam and sceptical of the R&R benefits. These latter formed themselves into the BNA (the movement to stop the Narmada Dam) and began a long series of meetings, rallies, protests, demonstrations, public education campaigns and, critically, networking with NGOs throughout India and subsequently throughout the world. The Police Departments of the three states concerned were, to put it at its lowest, not adept at handling sustained non-violent protest with the result that human rights abuses, in the form of police violence, police shootings of unarmed crowds, and officially sponsored rape of women, grew to levels unacceptable in a country not unused to the politics of the rough-house. The worse the human rights violations, the more national and international support the BNA garnered and the more the official promoters of the dam were put on the defensive.

As the preliminary work on the dam neared completion and the prospect of actual inundation of villages in the valley floor became real, so the deficiencies of the R&R programme became evermore obvious and evermore alarming. Where resettlement had taken place, however, poor planning, poor implementation, poor consultation and inept administration led to two tragic results. The first was that the host communities, often moved out of their own traditional land to make room for the oustees, became increasingly hostile, both to the oustees and to their own local politicians, thus ensuring that, whatever the official position of the State government, on the ground local administrators decelerated resettlement from very slow to almost stop.

Second, oustees who had been resettled soon found the size of the gap between promise and reality, and therefore tended to move back to their native villages, spreading the word that it was better to run the risk of drowning in a year or two than to face the certainty of immediate starvation, social dislocation and humiliation. Deceleration on the supply side was thus matched by deceleration on the demand side, and the day when the sluices would be closed and the waters rise grew ever closer.

By now, national and international concern had reached such heights that the main partners—the Bank, the Government of India, the State governments—agreed to an independent review by a team led by the highly-respected Bradford Morse in 1992. Despite sustained vilification of the BNA and its allies by politicians at all levels in India and, of course, officials at the World Bank, the Morse Report not only upheld most of the complaints of the BNA and its allies, but also came to the conclusion that work could ‘continue only with the help of unacceptable means’. Despite the many layers of diplomatic velvet, there could be no doubting what that meant. The Morse Review Committee was convinced that the BNA and its allies were so well organised and so determined that they would prevent the completion of the dam unless confronted with the moral equivalent of a civil war.

The Morse Report also produced damning, indeed shaming, evidence that the Bank itself had not followed its own procedures, especially in terms of consultation and participation with the oustees.

In March 1993, the bank withdrew from the project, stopping any further funding, on the grounds that the Government of India and the State Governments were in breach of the contractual agreement of 1985. Never has the Bank’s credibility been so damaged, not least because it sought to place the blame of what had become an irremediable situation on its partners while independent evidence suggested that the Bank itself was at least co-responsible for the mess.

Space does not permit a detailed account of subsequent developments, which include a hearing by the Supreme Court, a moratorium on further construction, a resumption of work—and increasingly high profile and vociferous resistance. The struggle continues.

That this is an astonishing achievement for tribal peoples from three states hardly needs emphasis here. To what can we attribute its success? We suggest four things. First, as implied in the opening paragraphs of this section, there was a remarkable concurrence of widespread national and international dissatisfaction with the technocratic and seemingly autocratic *modus operandi* of the Bank. To that extent, Narmada was an accident waiting to happen. Second, the very complexity of the political relationships between the Government of India and the State Governments on the one hand, and between the Governments of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh on the other, ensured that this was always going to be a fragile operation. Third, the fact that the BNA was constituted and led by tribals had a hugely significant symbolic impact, both within India and beyond it. These are people whom Western history has left behind and whom development seldom touches. Combine the image of the tribals with the image of the oustees (homeless, landless, the victims of alien processes, the objects rather than the subjects of their own history) and you have a powerful cocktail that, in an age of instant communication via the Internet, can be exploited with devastating effect. Fourth, and in some ways more prosaically, the losers are more identifiable; more certain of their losses; more geographically concentrated; and often more socially and politically homogeneous than the gainers. Although the dam's sponsors sought to mobilise potential beneficiaries (and the actual beneficiaries among the tribals who had found semi-permanent employment in the construction), they were unsuccessful in generating a counter myth to that of the oustees.

In conclusion, let a Vice-President of the World Bank have the last word: 'If anyone had told me in 1985 that we would be given a bloody nose by a bunch of illiterate tribals in Gujarat, I would have told him to see a shrink.' Quite.

5. Eschatological Ethnography

These two cases, the Chipko movement and the Narmada Dam, are miracles. In other words, they are unexpected events that Christians nonetheless expect.

In a narrative which privileges the mighty, the effectiveness of the resistance mounted by these apparently powerless peoples is baffling. It is difficult to account for their success in the face of globally powerful interests. Christian dogmatic description, by contrast, rehearses a narrative in which the humble and meek are eschatologically exalted. The events in the Uttar Kannad and in Gujarat do not represent the tragically normal encounter between the mighty and the meek, of course. They are exceptional, and that makes them striking. Yet, at the same time, they are what an eschatologically oriented Christian description of the world expects to see. Our descriptions themselves are inescapably eschatological for this reason, as we shall argue.

There is nothing novel in our claim that dogmatic theology is best practised through ethnography. A move towards descriptive rather than theoretical dogmatics can be seen in work by Stanley Hauerwas, in commentary on his work by Samuel Wells and in the work of Hauerwas' pupil William Cavanaugh.¹⁵ We differ from Hauerwas in choosing, for our examples, descriptions of patently non-Christian communities. Hauerwas illustrates Christian virtues by describing Christians. Our focus is not merely on the illustration of virtues, vitally important though that is, but on the development of a broader world-view through the medium of dogmatic description. That means there is no reason for us to think we should confine our descriptions to Christian milieux.

Our two programmatic assertions, that theological ethnography expects the unexpected and describes anything in which God might be involved, obviously need refinement and further illustration. We are nervous of saying too much. There is clearly a danger of appearing to think that successes like those presented here exemplify God's action in some special way. They may not. Nor do we believe that a Christian perspective means one expects success in clashes of this kind: the common experience is, on the contrary, of tragedy and death. Rather, we are attempting to show that in such descriptions one can say who God is and

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Ministry of a Congregation' in *Christian Existence Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), pp. 111–31; Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 135–40, 168–9; William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

what one expects in the world. We do not yet have a strong enough hold on this idea to show how it might work out in situations of radical failure, and for that reason descriptions of cases which fail await a future occasion. It is tempting at this stage to think that such descriptions would serve as confirmations that when the magnificat in Luke's gospel describes a group called 'the mighty', they are called mighty for a reason, although their might is obviously illusory and shortly to be stripped from them.

It seems to us that descriptions of miraculous accounts of the humble and meek being exalted (in however temporary and modest a fashion) discharge a dogmatic task very effectively. For example, they help prevent thinking that God's rescue of the poor is to be endlessly deferred: for that reason we must describe these events, which both have already happened and are still happening, as eschatological. They could also be described as parables of trinitarian embodiment. That is, they illustrate what is meant in theology by participation in God's own life. This is risky because the groups in question are not Christian. But it would be equally risky if they *were* Christian: there is no guarantee that what we think of as the Church really is the Church.

Our descriptions are anything but neutral. An eschatological parable of trinitarian embodiment tells us something about what it means to be powerless and yet to confound the mighty. It is trinitarian because it shows how the many become one, in so far as the powerless are understood to be participating in God's power. Our approach can be contrasted with Hans Küng's Global Ethics project. Where Küng is convinced that the only hope for the world is a Global Ethics, elaborated as a centrally administered strategy for creaturely survival, we see God's kingdom in disparate activities by local groups with no strategic global agenda.¹⁶ Küng identifies with the rich and powerful and calls for reform at the level of the Reichstag, the White House and the World Bank. This project may well be a success. However, its success would be infinitely more surprising from a Christian

¹⁶ For Küng's project see especially Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (tr. J. Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1997) and Hans Küng (ed.), *Yes to a Global Ethic* (London: SCM Press, 1996).

dogmatic perspective than the tiny but significant victories of forest dwellers and illiterate tribal peoples. K ng's project is not trinitarian, in that its purpose is humanly to take the many and strategically make them one. By contrast, we understand trinitarian participation as *God's* gathering of the many and do not view this as a purely human project. Our ethnographies have to do with providence rather than social engineering, albeit a providence that is transformative, not quietistic.

Despite what we consider the advantages of a trinitarian and providential perspective, there is a danger of being enormously foolish. An approach which emphasises local actions, and which draws attention (in however eschatological a fashion) to the success of the weak against the well-funded corporations of the strong flips over very easily into a desperate optimism. Optimism can support itself by telling stories like the ones recounted here and immunise itself against despair by refusing to analyse global trends and macro-economic structures. This is tempting, not least because of the daunting complexity of global analysis. This is not irresistible, however. We believe global analysis is not powerful enough to yield the detailed information and secure theory necessary to develop an effective global strategy. A project like K ng's requires worrying generalisations. He must generalise about religious traditions when he seeks what they have in common, he must generalise about economic practices when he seeks global solutions, and he must generalise about moral commitments when he seeks policies that will be acceptable to all parties. The consequence of this is that particular communities may not fit: for a Global Ethics to work, anomalies must be *made* to fit. For a global strategy, local variations are a problem and a threat. A trinitarian model is not impatient with local variations. Instead of trying to find a generalising unitary view *from the centre* that will accommodate all of them, it looks for different practices that arise *as local initiatives*. From the perspective of a thinker like K ng, the drawback of our approach is that it places the burden of imagination and action on forest dwellers and illiterate tribals rather than on highly trained specialists and technicians working in Europe and North America. Our hope is that from a perspective that takes God seriously it is absurd to consider this a drawback.

What implications does this have for dogmatic theology? It might seem we are advocating, in a grand way, an end to systematic theology as it is conducted in modern universities: we are not. Just as dogmatic theology is a larger category than ethics, for Barth, so systematic theology is a larger category than description, for us. Dogmatic theology reflects on poetry, paintings, music and dance as well as ethnographic description. One can draw attention to the dangers of emphasising the 'coherence' of theology, or of characterising Christianity as a system of ideas which are more interesting than other systems or which have fewer aporias. However, we do not wish to appear to reduce theology to social anthropology, particularly as we are doing anthropology far less competently than a trained anthropologist does it. Regarding the latter, we are acutely aware that our practice of description falls far short of a truly ethnographic account, which must record crucial details concerning kinship, property and gender, for example. A deeper consideration of caste relations and the social position of tribals would similarly enable our hurried sketches to bridge the gap between anthropological and political-scientific modes of description.

Nevertheless, in recent work Stanley Hauerwas has struggled against what he sees as the twin temptations of presenting Christian thought as a disembodied system of ideas and doing 'Durkheim with an ecclesial twist'.¹⁷ We are attempting to help address Hauerwas' problem. This problem arises precisely because it is possible to think that theologians and anthropologists have different jobs. At the risk of over-simplifying, we think that it is one thing to distinguish dogmatics from ethnography, and another to separate them. It makes sense to distinguish dogmaticians from ethnographers: each task requires a particular training and a particular discipline. However, we think it is fatal to identify the theologian with only one of these disciplines. We suspect that Hauerwas' twin temptations arise because such identification is often taken for granted. This article tries to help solve this problem by insisting that description is the medium in which dogmatics and ethnography include each other.

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 37.

We insist that ethnography is dogmatics because *description already includes a metaphysic*. The extreme aspect of this position is contained in the assertion that dogmatic clarification does not add anything substantial to the description itself. For that reason, we believe that theologians should take ethnographic description at least as seriously as dogmatics: indeed, the latter (if it concerns 'the real') is, and should be, the slave of the former. In other words, we are trying to emphasise what is implied in using a description as an *illustration*. To use something as an illustration already implies an agenda. It seems to us that dogmatics is the part of theology which clarifies the agenda of which parables are the illustrations. We wish to blur the line between ethnographic description and parable. Hauerwas' programmatic claim is that the part of theology which raises moral claims is best done by illustration rather than by codification: that is part of what the emphasis on narrative entails. Our further claim is that this applies to all dogmatic theology and not just to the part of it known as Christian ethics. Barth has already adequately shown that dogmatics includes ethics. Hauerwas insists that ethics is a matter of narrative illustration. Our engagement with Foucault has suggested that description is *sufficient* for making dogmatic (and hence moral) claims, and that dogmatic elucidation adds nothing substantial.

We wish to conclude by observing that this does not mean dogmatics has no function: it means merely that dogmatic elucidation is secondary to dogmatic description, and that dogmatic theology should be practised by describing things. In a slogan: *dogmatics is for teaching Christians how to see*. It is for that reason that the descriptions of the Chipko movement and the Narmada Dam are at the centre of this account. If, as we suggest, ethnography is dogmatics, then the major implication of this article is that theologians should attempt to become better ethnographers. However, dogmatics is about more than vision. It is also about transformation. It is true that ethnography has not historically been connected to political activism (quite the reverse: anthropology has its roots in colonialism). Here, however, dogmatic theology may prove liberating for ethnography. The ethnography we are advocating is *eschatological*. Precisely because God liberates the world to be the world, dogmatic ethnography is forbidden to be description of the

world merely 'as it is'. It also describes the world in the light of 'as it shall be'. Dogmatic ethnography pays attention to detail, but it does so eschatologically: hence our interest in describing the powerless in possession of power. Thus, to develop our slogan, dogmatics is for teaching Christians to *see with an eye on transformation*. Taking these issues further, however, lies outside the scope of this paper. Our aim has been more limited: to raise the status of ethnography as a Christian dogmatic discipline. To narrate a more thorough-going connection between ethnography and eschatology, as well as to make the description more genuinely ethnographic, remains a substantial task, however. Discharging that task is too important to be left to the authors of this paper. Our hope is that others may wish to join in working out the implications of saying that ethnography is dogmatics.

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